

INTERNATIONAL

Heated Rivalry: How distributors & US studios passed on hit drama

By Richard Middleton | 9 June 2026

Fremantle among numerous international sales firms that chose not to invest in ice hockey series

Fremantle was among a host of global distributors to pass on hit Canadian drama Heated Rivalry.

The steamy relationship drama set within the ice hockey world shot to global fame last year having been created by Letterkenny's Jacob Tierney, who adapted the show from Rachel Reid's novel series Game Changers.



Heated Rivalry

It was produced by Accent Aigu Entertainment for Bell Media's streamer Crave, becoming a global hit and subsequently selling to HBO Max in the US and Australia, Sky in the UK, and Movistar+ in Spain, among numerous others.

Jens Richter, chief exec of commercial and international at Fremantle, admitted during a keynote at NEM Dubrovnik that his company was among a slew of distributors to pass on investing in the series when it was initially pitched, joking that he had now been forgiven for the decision.

Heated Rivalry's route to success was convoluted, with Tierney walking away from one US streamer because of attempts to dilute the romantic scenes. It is understood numerous other Hollywood studios and European distributors also looked and passed on the show before UK-based Sphere Media invested.

The move came just months after the Jonathan Ford-led distribution company had been acquired by Crave parent, Bell Media, earlier in 2025. The decision allowed producers to retain the storylines from the novel, and Bell Media's vice-president of content and programming Justin Stockman has said [embracing risk](#) was a key element in its subsequent success.

Exec producer Brendan Brady previously told the Pivot podcast with Kara Swisher that he and Tierney had also invested their producer fees into the show to ensure it made budget.

"We understood [companies passing] because on paper, this didn't seem like an amazing, massive hit straight out of the gate," Brady told the Vox Media podcast earlier this year.

Brady added that each episode had been produced for around C\$3m (£1.6m), with Crave contributing around 30% of the budget in addition to a similar amount from provincial and federal funding, and tax credits.

"Bell Media... had just acquired a distribution company called Sphere Abacus out of the UK and we were looking for that last portion of the budget, so they came in for 20%," Brady told the podcast. "And then the last 10% was Jacob [Tierney] and I putting in our producers fee - we put in almost all of that, less what we had to pay for taxes. So it was a big gamble for us."



A second season of Heated Rivalry is in the works and set to debut on Crave next year, with HBO Max again attached to take US and Australian rights.

